

Message Text

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13

ACTION SS-30

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C O N F I D E N T I A L DAMASCUS 2348

EXDIS

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TAGS: PINS, SY

SUBJECT: SARG SUSPECTS PFLP-GENERAL COMMAND BEHIND ANTI-
U.S. BOMBINGS

1. SUMMARY: SARG SUSPECTS AHMAD JABRIL'S PFLP-GC AS
PERPETRATOR OCTOBER 10-11 BOMBING OF US-OWNED NATIONAL
CASH REGISTER (NCR) IN DAMASCUS AND ALEPPO. WE ARE URGING MEETING
BETWEEN SYRIAN BOMB EXPERTS AND USG COUNTERPARTS IN EFFORT DEVELOP
FURTHER TECHNICAL INFORMATION. SARG TAKING MORE SERIOUSLY
ANTI-US IMPLICATIONS THESE BOMBINGS. END SUMMARY.

2. MET WITH COS SHIHABI EVEING OCTOBER 12 TO URGE HE
SET UP MEETING BETWEEN USG EXPLOSIVES EXPERTS, IN DAMASCUS
FOR SECRETARY'S VISIT, AND THEIR SYRIAN COUNTERPARTS.
ARGUED IT COULD BE USEFUL FOR SARG TO HAVE BENEFIT OF
US EXPERIENCE IN ANALYZING EVIDENCE IN EFFORT DETERMINE
SOURCE OF SUPPLY AND OTHER PERTINENT INFORMATION. TOLD
HIM I COULD NOT DETAIN OUR EXPERTS IN DAMASCUS AFTER
SECRETARY'S DEPARTURE BUT THEY COULD BE AT HIS DISPOSAL FOR
MEETINGS OCTOBER 13 AND PERHAPS ON OCTOBER 14. SHIHABI PROMISED
DISCUSS THIS WITH SYRIAN EXPLOSIVE EXPERTS SAME EVENING AND BE
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BACK IN TOUCH OCTOBER 13. SHIHABI SAID HE WOULD CHECK WHAT EVIDENCE

REMAINED IN HANDS OF SYRIAN EXPLOSIVES EXPERTS. SAID THAT SIMPLE TIMING DEVICE HAD BEEN USED IN NCR BOMBING IN DAMASCUS, SET FOR HALF HOUR AFTER SUNSET WHEN COULD BE ASSUMED EVERYONE WOULD BE ABSENT FROM SCENE BREAKING RAMADAN FAST AT HOME. IN MID-SEPTEMBER BOMBING OF PREMISES USIS, LONG CORD IGNITED BY CIGARETTE LIGHTER HAD BEEN USED. IN BOTH CASES THREE TO FIVE KILOGRAMS OF DYNAMITE HAD PROVIDED THE EXPLOSIVE CHARGE.

2. SHIHABI THEN COMMENTED THAT NCR BOMBINGS HAD INTRODUCED NEW DIMENSION. I AGREED, COMMENTING THAT SELECTION OF NCR AS TARGET REFLECTED MORE PLANNING AND RESEARCH THAN EXPLOSIONS EITHER AT DAMASCUS FAIR OR AT PREMISES UNDER DISCUSSION FOR USIS OCCUPANCY. (SHIHABI NOTED THAT AS FAR AS HE CONCERNED USIS BOMBING STILL OPEN TO TWO INTERPRETATIONS: EITHER IT WAS CAUSED BY GROUP(S) INTERESTED IN EMBARRASSING US-SYRIAN RELATIONS OR DONE PURELY FOR PROFIT BY BUILDING'S OWNER (DAMASCUS 1963). SAID I FEARED WE MIGHT BE AT BEGINNING OF INTELLIGENT CAMPAIGN ORGANIZED TO STRIKE AT SERIES OF TARGETS ASSOCIATED WITH AMERICAN BUSINESS HERE. IT IS NOT GENERALLY KNOWN THAT NCR ONLY LEGAL BRANCH OF AMERICAN COMPANY CURRENTLY OPERATING IN SYRIA. NOTED THAT EARLIER SAME DAY I HAD MET WITH NCR REGIONAL MANAGER FROM ATHENS WHO HAD BLUNTLY OUTLINED PROBLEM VIS-A-VIS HIS US HEADQUARTERS IN JUSTIFYING CONTINUED NCR OPERATIONS IN SYRIA: (A) SYRIAN BRANCHES WOULD REGISTER SUBSTANTIAL LOSSES THIS YEAR DUE TO BOMBINGS AND (B) COMPANY WOULD HESITATE MAINTAIN OFFICE WHERE ITS EMPLOYEES WERE SUBJECT TO PHYSICAL ATTACK. I EMPHASIZED THAT NCR AND EARLIER BOMBINGS COULD ONLY COMPLICATE MY TASK OF TRYING REINTRODUCE AMERICAN FIRMS TO SYRIA AND CREATE THE PRIVATE SECTOR TIES WHICH I KNEW HIS GOVERNMENT EARNESTLY SOUGHT. THIS CLEARLY GAVE SHIHABI PAUSE. HE QUICKLY SAID HE PREPARED NOW FOR SPECIAL SURVEILLANCE OF ALL FIRMS FEATURING AMERICAN PRODUCTS. I UNDERTOOK HELP HIM CROSS-CHECK COMPLETENESS HIS SURVEILLANCE BY PROVIDING LIST OF ALL MAJOR AGENTS AND DISTRIBUTORS AMERICAN PRODUCTS IN SYRIA.

3. SHIHABI THEN FOR FIRST TIME REVEALED SPECIFIC THRUST OF SARG'S OWN SUSPICIONS ABOUT PERPETRATOR(S) OF THESE BOMBINGS. SARG'S PRIME SUSPECT IS AHMAD JABRIL OF THE PFLP-CONFIDENTIAL

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GENERAL COMMAND. SECONDARY SUSPECT IS HABBASH AND PFLP. COLLUSION BETWEEN THE TWO, HE SAID, IS CONCEIVABLE. JABRIL'S ORGANIZATION, SHIHABI POINTED OUT, UNLIKE PFLP HAS LEGAL OFFICE IN DAMASCUS AND, THEREFORE, THE GREATER CAPABILITY TO MOUNT THESE BOMBINGS. FURTHERMORE, JABRIL HIMSELF WAS FORMALLY AN EXPLOSIVES EXPERT WHEN SERVING AS AN OFFICER IN THE SYRIAN ARMY. IF JABRIL HAS BEEN BEHIND THESE BOMBINGS, SHIHABI NOTED, HE WILL HAVE TAKEN EVERY

PRECAUTION TO COVER HIS TRACKS "BECAUSE HE KNOWS HE WILL
PAY SEVERELY FOR THIS IF WE FIND HIM OUT."

4. SHIHABI NOTED THAT THE SO-CALLED "ARAB COMMUNIST ORGANIZATION"
IN BEIRUT HAD ONCE AGAIN CLAIMED CREDIT FOR ANTI-U.S. BOMBINGS
IN SYRIA. SHIHABI REITERATED THAT SARG HAS NO INFORMATION
ABOUT THIS ORGANIZATION AND STRONGLY SUSPECTS IT IS A
PAPER FRONT DESIGNED TO COVER THE OPERATIONS OF ANOTHER
GROUP.

5. COMMENT: I FOUND SHIHABI CONSIDERABLY MORE FORTHCOMING
IN SHARING SARG INTELLIGENCE ON THESE BOMBINGS THAN DURING
OUR PREVIOUS CONVERSATIONS. HE NO LONGER SEEKS DOWNPLAY
SIGNIFICANCE OF ATTACKS ON IDENTIFIABLE AMERICAN INTERESTS.
I SENSE DEVELOPING CONFIDENCE ON HIS PART THAT WE HAVE A
COMMON INTEREST IN MARSHALLING ALL AVAILABLE TECHNICAL
EXPERTISE TO GET AT PERPETRATORS THESE INCIDENTS. REMAINS
TO BE SEEN IF HE IS ABLE TO FOLLOW THROUGH AND ACCEPT OUR
OFFER. MEANWHILE SARG NOW APPEARS TO BE BORING IN EXCLUSIVELY
ON ONE OR MORE PALESTINIAN GROUPS AS PERPETRATORS.
MURPHY

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